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State panel approves Nevada's first mercury regs for gold mines

By **SCOTT SONNER**
Associated Press Writer

RENO, Nev. (AP) -- With support from the mining industry and opposition from environmentalists, state regulators in Nevada approved the first regulations of their kind in the nation Wednesday for airborne mercury emissions at precious metal mines.

The state Environmental Commission unanimously approved the regulations as a replacement for a voluntary program currently in place at Nevada's largest gold mines.

"The program takes the control of mercury emissions from precious metals mining to a new level," said Leo Drozdoff, administrator of the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection.

The state agency proposed the rules requiring more monitoring, testing and reporting of emissions at industrial mines in the state.

Critics argue they would effectively rubber-stamp the status quo and provide little actual protection of public health and the environment. They wanted mandated reductions and/or limits on emissions.

"The companies are left to monitor themselves, and only report their emissions once a year," said Elyssa Rosen of the Reno-based Great Basin Mine Watch.

"Self-regulation is not enough to protect the health of our communities," she said.

Or, as Crescent Valley rancher Lee Loudon put it: "They've got the fox guarding the hen house."

Russ Fields, head of the Nevada Mining Association, was among those who testified in support of the regulations during Wednesday's hearing before the commission.

"The state of Nevada has taken a tremendous step here to reduce the mercury emissions and we're glad to support it," Fields told the Reno Gazette-Journal before the hearing.


An estimated 100 tons of mercury has been discharged into the environment from Nevada mines over the last 25 years, according to a 2005 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report. It typically is released into the atmosphere during roasting and other refining processes.

State and industry officials say the major mines deserve credit for dramatic reductions in mercury emissions after

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forming the voluntary program with the support of NDEP and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

According to the EPA's toxic release inventory, Queenstake Resources Ltd., Newmont Mining Corp., Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc. and Placer Dome Inc. reduced emissions a combined 75 percent between 1998 and 2003 - from 13,153 pounds of mercury to 4,488 pounds.

Drozdoft said the ability to develop a new regulatory program "of this magnitude and on such an aggressive schedule" would not have been possible without cooperation from both the mining industry and environmentalists.

Conservation groups in Idaho and Utah blame Nevada gold mines for mercury in fish in certain bodies of water in their states.

"We're talking about the health of our children," Tim Wagner of the Sierra Club's Utah chapter said before Wednesday's hearing. "We feel the situation is of a critical nature."

"We have huge concerns," added Salt Lake City Mayor Ross "Rocky" Anderson, who argued in a letter to the commission that the state is more worried about the costs to the industry than the health of its residents.

Nevada regulators maintain no link has been proven between Nevada gold mines and mercury levels down wind.

"Although it's well known that the Western United States is affected by mercury from long-range and regional sources, much more research needs to be done to identify specific sources of mercury emissions, how the mercury travels through the environment and what its potential impacts might be on health and the environment," Drozdoft said Wednesday.

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